

# A career built brick by brick

**The chairman of Sobha Developers has built mansions for royalty. He is now eyeing a new venture after retirement**

BY PAVITRA JAYARAMAN & MADHURIMA NANDY

P.N.C. Menon admits he is a bit of a perfectionist.

Dressed in a Lanvin suit with diamond-studded cufflinks, black Prada shoes and not a hair out of place, the 62-year-old chairman of Sobha Developers says: "If there is a spot of dirt on my shoes, I can't work. It makes me lose my confidence."

He points out that his need for perfection reflects in the kind of work he has been delivering for 25 years, which has led to a company with a market capitalization of ₹2,400 crore, and a presence in Bangalore, Thrissur, Pune, Coimbatore and Chennai.

Menon formed Sobha Developers Ltd in India in 1995, 18 years after he set up his interiors and construction business in Oman, where he climbed the first rungs of the ladder to success. That business is still there. Sobha Developers, named after his homemaker wife, is headquartered in Bangalore and became a public listed company in 2006. It started small but now has 2,000 full-time employees and 25,000 contract workers. Some of its prominent projects in Bangalore include residential ones such as Sobha Amethyst, Sobha Sunscape, Sobha Carnation and Sobha Magnolia. Projects outside Bangalore include Sobha Carnation in Pune, Sobha Emerald and Sobha Turquoise in Coimbatore and Sobha Malachite

in Thrissur.

Menon's life fits the rags-to-riches cliché, and he politely protests that the story has been told too often. Yet, at our insistence, he narrates his journey from Kerala to Oman when he was 26, with just ₹50 in his pocket. Menon's father died when he was 10. He had to drop out of college because of financial problems at home—he was pursuing a BCom from Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur.

He then began doing small design jobs, such as interiors, in Kerala. He'd had no formal training. "I could say that it is destiny because I met my first business partner by chance when he was visiting Kerala to buy a fishing boat," says Menon, who followed him to Oman.

Menon took a loan of 3,000 rials (around ₹3.49 lakh now) from a bank in Oman to set up his interior decor business. He climbed up steadily, "two steps" at a time. "My first assignment was the interiors of a photo studio, doing the panelling, etc.," he recalls.

Over the next 17 years, he moved towards larger projects, hotels and then palatial homes, including a project for a royal family in West Asia. Under contract not to name any of his royal clients, Menon shows a book containing photographic samples of his work in palaces.

"You have to be exceptional to be successful. I am not being arrogant," he smiles, glancing at the intricate and rich work in the images, when asked how he landed these deals. With names such as the Sultan of Brunei on his list of clients (he did the interiors of a palace for him), Menon was keen to expand the geographical reach of his business.

"I tried the US and UK initially, but then decided that the scope for growth in India was high," says Menon, who focused on premium and luxury residences in Bangalore before moving on to large office spaces. In 2008, he met Infosys chairman and chief mentor, N.R. Narayana Murthy, who gave Sobha the opportunity to build Infosys'

first campus at Electronic City. What triggered Murthy's interest was one of their first projects, Sobha Sapphire, a premium residential project on Bangalore's Bellary road.

"It's been an honourable relationship," says Menon of his association with Murthy, adding fondly: "He is a busy person, admirable and unusual. It is difficult to have his vision. There have been only four people in India with that vision— J.R.D. Tata, G.D. Birla, Dhirubhai Ambani and Murthy."

Menon's entry to the country did not come without its share of troubles. The economic downturn of 2008-09 taught him key lessons. "What we learnt is that debt needs to be controlled. Debt used to be two-three times the equity, but in this situation, debt-equity can't be more than 5:1. From 2, our debt-equity ratio has come down to 0.6:1 now," he says.

With all that water under the bridge now, Menon, who lives in Dubai, is planning his retirement or, rather, the work he can do after retiring. The whiteboard in his Bangalore office, where he spends up to two months a year, has a countdown to the day of his retirement. "We started five years ago when I was 58, and that number is changing every day," he says, glancing at the number 928 (on the date of the interview) written in the blank space with a marker.

His son Ravi Menon (29), the vice-chairman of the company, will take over as chairman on 17 November 2013. He also has two daughters—Bindu (31) and Revathi (26). "There is a clear succession plan in place with my son becoming the chairman. I may or may not be on the board," he says, adding that his son, who works out of Bangalore, is perhaps more equipped than he was at his age to handle the business.

So what does he plan to do? "There are three things I need—physical and mental health, plus I should be alive. If all three are positive, I will be working," says Menon, who plans to start a new firm that will make and sell furniture and home fittings. Labelled PNC, the new brand will be launched internationally and will perhaps not be available in India initially.

PNC reflects his need to work. "I'm a restless person, so I don't take weekends off," he says. "People who have worked their way up are insecure about the things they have. I wouldn't know what to do on holiday."

He pauses, thinking. "Maybe (I'll take) half a day," he adds, deciding to give himself a concession.



**Destiny's child:** Menon, whose father died when he was 10 and who couldn't afford to complete college, now heads a ₹2,400 crore company.

## IN PARENTHESIS

While going on holiday might not be his idea of peace, P.N.C. Menon spends two and a half hours every day praying. He recently donated his weight in gold to the Guruvayur temple in Kerala. Menon insists he is spiritual, while pointing at a shrine for all faiths in his Bangalore office. "The prayers are important to me, and even if I can't do it at one go, I catch up during the day," he says.